“The Depth of Six Inches”: Prince Hal’s Head-Wound at the Battle of Shrewsbury

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“No shot took flight but a God guided it.”

Toward the end of Shakespeare’s King Henry iv, Part 1, the curtains at last rise on the climactic action sequence of the play: the historical Battle of Shrewsbury, which was fought on 21 July 1403. The unfolding of this engagement, an intensely bloody three-hour affair according to its contemporary chroniclers, lasts for much of Act v in Shakespeare’s dramatization, culminating in the death of Hotspur, Henry Percy, at the hands of an increasingly noble Prince Hal, the future Henry v. Easily missed among the speeches and martial actions of this exciting sequence – but rather pertinent to the topic at hand – is the fact that the young Prince Hal is wounded amid the fighting. Or, more precisely said, he is wounded off-stage during a scene break, so that King Henry iv’s opening lines of Act v, Scene iv are to tender his worry for his son’s injury:

KING. I prithee, Harry, withdraw thyself; thou bleedest too much.
Lord John of Lancaster, go you with him.
LANCASTER. Not I, my lord, unless I did bleed too.
PRINCE. I [do] beseech Your Majesty, make up,
Lest your retirement do amaze your friends.
KING. I will do so.
My lord of Wesmorland, lead him to his tent.
WESTMORLAND. Come, my lord, I’ll lead you to your tent.
PRINCE. Lead me, my lord? I do not need your help;
And God forbid a shallow scratch should drive
The Prince of Wales from such a field as this,
Where stained nobility lies trodden on,
And rebels’ arms triumph in massacres!1

The wound that the Prince of Wales has received is not specified by Shakespeare, and Hal’s self-diagnosed “shallow scratch” certainly does little enough to slow him down in the Bard’s hands. He will, as noted, go on to defeat the warrior-like Hotspur, after having already fought off the Earl of Douglas to save his father. Indeed, a great many performances of the play – Orson Welles’ famed 1965 film adaptation Chimes of Midnight among them – simply cut the lines, along with any sense that the prince is wounded.2

Nature of the Wound

The wounding of the prince at Shrewsbury is, however, an unquestionable historical fact. Time and again in primary sources regarding this “herd and a stronge bataille” [hard and fierce battle], it is reported that the sixteen-year-old prince, the future King Henry V, “wasse hurte in the face with an arrowe.”3 And while many of the contemporary chronicles are similarly brief in their reference to the injury, it is clear that Prince Hal did not suffer a mere “shallow scratch,” as it is later described by Shakespeare. Quite to the contrary, the arrow struck Prince Hal directly in the face, penetrating his head and embedding itself, according to the surgeon’s report, “in posteriori parte ossis capiti secundum mensuram 6 uncharum” [in the posterior part of the skull at a depth of six inches].4 The medieval inch was legislatively defined “as the length of 3 barleycorns,” but, as Ronald Edward Zupko notes, “the actual standard in fact was a particular rod of metal, usually a yard-bar, on which inches were marked.”5 Though time has meant the disappearance of “the original iron measure […] it is unlikely that it differed from the present standard by more than 0.041 inches (1 millimeter).”6 Even if we equate the medieval inch with the modern

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2 Chimes of Midnight, DVD, directed by Orson Welles (1965).
4 This and all subsequent references to Bradmore’s account follow the transcriptions of the text provided by S.J. Lang, “John Bradmore and His Book Philomena,” Social History of Medicine 5 (1992): 128–30. Translations of these and other texts, unless otherwise attributed, are mine.
6 Zupko, British Weights & Measures, 21 n. 9, 21.